

The 18th Party Congress: Testing the Limits of Institutionalization

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The recent 18th Party Congress, convened only after a year of extremely contentious politics, surprised by generating a leadership group that appeared lopsided in favor of supporters of former general secretary Jiang Zemin (江泽民), thereby raising questions about “politics by elders” (老人政治) and the limits of acceptable intervention. Ironically the apparent bias in favor of Jiang’s network may give new general secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) a relatively free hand in the next few years. Nevertheless, by generating the oldest Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) in years, the congress set up a situation in which five of the seven members of the PBSC will have to retire in only five years and many contentious issues will have to be readdressed relatively soon. Sorting out succession politics issues appears to be getting more difficult over time, but such a judgment will have to wait at least another five years.

One of the most dramatic years in recent Chinese politics largely ended with the 18th Party Congress, held November 8–14, and the ensuing First Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee on November 15. Coming in the wake of the Bo Xilai (薄熙来) and Gu Kailai (谷开来) scandals and the delay in convening the Congress, the announcements of the new leadership lineup—including the 18th Central Committee, its Politburo and Standing Committee, as well as a new Central Military Commission (CMC), Secretariat, and Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC)—carried an unusual degree of drama, especially for a party that tries hard to avoid any public display of contention. There will be more political changes in the coming weeks and months as leaders change positions and as a new State Council lineup is announced at the National People’s Congress (NPC) session in March 2013, but none of these changes will carry the political significance of the leadership changes just announced.

If the outcome of the leadership turnover is now known, the processes that generated it and the implications for understanding leadership dynamics remain obscure and difficult to interpret. If outgoing general secretary Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) was the big loser in this transition—a judgment that we may not be able to render for another five years—it is not clear if this result was related to the Bo Xilai case or whether it was a product of other leadership dynamics. If the latter is the case, whether the dynamic was a matter of age-related promotion or more of personal networks also remains unknown, though the latter explanation seems more likely to this writer. In any event, analysts are going to have to update their understandings of China’s elite politics.

Most analysts of Chinese politics have been working under the assumption that retired meant retired. Perhaps retired politicians would be consulted from time to time out of a younger generation's demonstration of respect for its elders, but direct and decisive intervention in ongoing political affairs was not supposed to occur. However, several retirees clearly intervened over the past year, sometimes settling accounts from years gone by and sometimes weighing in on the personnel arrangements that will guide China over the next five years or more. And the outcome of the 18th Party Congress opens or reopens questions about elite politics over the past decade.

In 2002, when Hu Jintao took over from Jiang Zemin, the PBSC was suddenly expanded from seven people to nine. Although this change could be explained as a means of promoting all those eligible under China's age-limit regulations from the Politburo to its Standing Committee, it seems more likely—and consistent with what we have just seen at the 18th Party Congress—to interpret this expansion of the PBSC as an effort to maintain Jiang Zemin's priority within the Chinese political system.¹ This interpretation appears to be reinforced by the results of the 17th Party Congress in 2007. That Party Congress came shortly after the purge of Shanghai party secretary Chen Liangyu (陈良宇) and was widely seen as an effort by Hu Jintao (and Wen Jiabao [温家宝]) to consolidate their authority at Jiang Zemin's expense, much as Jiang's purge of Beijing party secretary Chen Xitong (陈希同) was an effort to shore up his (Jiang's) authority at a time when an aging Deng Xiaoping was slipping both physically and mentally. One outcome of the 17th Party Congress was to consolidate the Party's investigative apparatus in the hands of Jiang Zemin, as his protégés He Guoqiang (贺国强), Zhou Yongkang (周永康), and Meng Jianzhu (孟建柱) took over the CDIC, the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, and the Minister of Public Security, respectively.² Hu Jintao did not go after another protégé of Jiang's until he focused on Bo Xilai this past year.

The Bo Xilai case brought out a number of present and retired officials, many of whom seemed to want to settle old scores. Bo Xilai's father, party elder Bo Yibo (薄一波), had been of great assistance to Jiang Zemin when Jiang moved to Beijing in 1989, but he also presided over the “party life” meeting in January 1987 that spent five days criticizing then-General Secretary Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) and driving him from office. Having been supported by Hu Yaobang, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao had motivation to bring down Bo Xilai (though the events of 1987 were not the only reason), and apparently did so even before the murder of Neil Heywood.³

Reportedly Jiang Zemin eventually came down hard on Bo Xilai,⁴ but he then turned his attention to succession politics and ensuring the pre-eminence of his and Zeng Qinghong's (曾庆红) associates. The first public sign that things were going badly for Hu Jintao was when Ling Jihua (令计划), head of the General Office and one of Hu's two closest aides (the other being Wang Huning [王沪宁]), was suddenly moved to head the United Front Work Department.⁵ Ling's son, Ling Gu (令谷), had died in a crash the previous March in a Ferrari, seriously injuring two young women, and Ling was apparently being held responsible for the incident (or at least the income that permitted his son to drive such a car).⁶ The United Front Department is one of the four departments directly under the Central Committee (the other three being the Propaganda Department,

the Organization Department, and the International Liaison Department), and its head is often, but not always, a member of the Politburo. Nevertheless, Ling's removal from the General Office, the center of China's political life, was certainly a blow to Hu Jintao.

The inability to protect one of those closest to him foreshadowed a far broader political defeat for Hu Jintao when the make-up of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) was unveiled on November 15.

Decennial leadership changes seem to be occasions for large-scale turnovers at the highest level of power, though we can only generalize on the basis of two such congresses since the death of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), that in 2002 and the recent congress. At the 16th Party Congress in 2002, 15 of the 25 Politburo members were forced to retire for reasons of age (and, in the case of Xie Fei [谢非], death), including six of seven PBSC members. "Helicopter" appointments, in which leaders are promoted more than one step, are not frequent but have been used to bring in new talent and/or to balance interests in the party. Most notably, Hu Jintao, Zhu Rongji (朱镕基), and CMC vice chairman Liu Huaqing (刘华清) took up positions on the PBSC in 1992 without first serving on the Politburo. Similarly, in 2007, both Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang (李克强) similarly moved directly to the PBSC. In 2002, however, the Congress decided not to make such two-level appointments, which could have shored up Hu Jintao's support and perhaps have begun to prepare a successor (as when Hu Jintao was appointed in 1992). Instead, the Congress opted to promote seven Politburo members (including Zeng Qinghong, who was then an alternate member of the Politburo) who were eligible by reasons of age, forcing the expansion of the PBSC from seven to nine members. Wu Yi (吴仪), also an alternate member of the Politburo, was promoted to full membership but not to the Standing Committee. The PBSC had not been that large since the Cultural Revolution. Enforcing the age criterion for promotion had the effect of reinforcing Jiang Zemin's informal authority and limiting the ability of the new leadership to undertake policy initiatives.

The 18th Party Congress ultimately followed this same precedent. Prior to the Congress there was much speculation that Wang Yang (汪洋), the party secretary in Guangdong province, and Li Yuanchao (李源潮), the head of the Organization Department, would be promoted to the PBSC. Both are regarded as relatively young (Wang was born in 1955 and Li in 1950), reform-oriented, and close to Hu Jintao. When all the hardball bargaining was over, neither made it. There were "logical" reasons in each case; Wang is still young enough to be eligible for two terms on the PBSC, and Li allegedly alienated some of the elders by promoting too many people close to Hu and ignoring the suggestions of elders (though the job of the head of the Organization Department is to support the head of the party).⁷

The final outcome was that the Congress decided to reduce the PBSC back to seven people and promoted the five of the oldest members of the Politburo up to the Standing Committee. Thus, of the eight people on the Politburo eligible for promotion, five were promoted. In addition to Wang and Li, Liu Yandong (刘延东), the only female member, was, like Wu Yi in 1992, passed over. Liu, born in 1945, is the same age as Yu

Zhengsheng (俞正声), who was promoted, and appears to have been the victim of gender politics.

Although the same age-based logic that was applied in 2002 was used again, it was the decision to reduce the PBSC to seven people that prevented the promotion of Wang and Li (and Liu), suggesting that the decision itself may well have been intended to block their promotions.⁸ Having lost the battle to promote his protégés to the PBSC, Hu subsequently declined to stay on as chairman of the Central Military Commission, a decision that has been presented as a move toward institutionalization rather than the political defeat it apparently was.⁹

The Issue of Institutionalization

For some years many observers of Chinese politics have been watching what they believed or hoped was the incremental institutionalization of the Chinese political system: that is, the gradual articulation of rules that could constrain infighting that might threaten the political system as well as economic growth that has been based, at least in part, on political stability. In some respects there has been real progress. Party Congresses have been held every five years, as called for by the party constitution, since the 11th Party Congress in 1977, regardless of political strains within the party. Retirement based on age, first implemented at lower levels, was finally extended to the Politburo level, for the most part, in 1997, when Jiang announced that the retirement age would be 70 (though Jiang himself did not retire until he was 76). The age was lowered to 68 in 2002, allegedly to give the younger Hu Jintao a more contemporary group of colleagues to work with.¹⁰ Those named to the Central Committee appear to have to be 63 years of age or younger, unless they are “party and state leaders,” although this rule has never, to the best of my knowledge, been reported in the Chinese press. Yet it makes sense since ministers and provincial leaders must retire at 65.

These “rules,” however, do have some flexibility and have seemingly been manipulated in political contests. At the time the retirement age of 70 was implemented, Qiao Shi (乔石), a rival to Jiang, just happened to be 70. Jiang himself was spared from the rule by Bo Yibo (Bo Xilai’s father) who reportedly declared that Jiang could not be allowed to retire since he had taken power at a time of danger to the party and state. The age was lowered to 68 five years later when Li Ruihuan (李瑞环), another Jiang antagonist, happened to turn 68. The size of the PBSC has been expanded and contracted at different times, to apparent political advantage. And promotion to the Standing Committee from the Politburo is not always followed as “helicopters,” as pointed out above, are sometimes allowed. It seems that the institutional rules have been broad enough to allow significant maneuvering and struggles for power.

In recent years it had appeared that the party was working to institutionalize, however informally, a balance of interests within the party. Thus Jiang Zemin, who seemed to favor his protégé Zeng Qinghong, was not allowed to pick his successor, and Hu Jintao, who seems to have favored his protégé, Li Keqiang, was not allowed to name his successor. This informal balance of power seemed designed to prevent a concentration of

power in the hands of one person or one group of people. It is this “balance of power” norm that seems endangered by the current personnel arrangements. We are not back to the days of “winner take all,” but the art of political compromise (a seeming prerequisite for institutionalization) seems to have suffered considerably. Ironically the apparent concentration of power in the hands of those with strong ties to Jiang Zemin may permit Xi Jinping to emerge as a significantly stronger leader than Hu Jintao in 2002 and later years, even as this sort of political game could threaten over time the norms that have provided political stability in the party.

The Rest of the Politburo

Although most attention has been focused on the PBSC, the makeup of the rest of the Politburo and, beyond that, the Central Committee is also of interest.

As mentioned above, there were 15 full members of the Politburo (not PBSC) going into the congress (not counting Bo Xilai), 7 of whom had to retire due to the age limit. Five of the remaining eight were promoted to the PBSC, leaving only three who would stay as full members of the Politburo. Thus, 12 seats needed to be filled (including the seat Bo Xilai had occupied). Two of those seats were taken by PLA representatives Fan Changlong (范长龙) and Xu Qiliang (许其亮), who replaced the retiring Xu Caihou (徐才厚) and Guo Boxiong (郭伯雄). Of the remaining 10 seats, 4 were taken by people with Communist Youth League (CYL) backgrounds, which meant that a total of 7 people in the new Politburo had CYL backgrounds (including Liu Yandong, Li Yuanchao, and Wang Yang) and 8 who did not. Although some people with CYL backgrounds, including Liu Yandong and Li Yuanchao, also have “princeling” backgrounds, it was interesting that the Congress decided to retain a rough balance between those who had CYL backgrounds and those who did not. This result, if not the outcome of the PBSC, comported with the norm of balancing interests within the party.

Of the 18 members of the new Politburo not on the Standing Committee, 6 will have to retire at the next Party Congress. If the promotion by age rule holds at the 19th Party Congress, then Li Yuanchao, Li Zhanshu (栗展书), Sun Chunlan (孙春兰), Xu Qiliang (许其亮), and Zhang Chunxian (张春县) would be promoted, but this seems unlikely unless the CCP is willing to break precedent and promote a PLA general and a woman to the Standing Committee. Moreover, if Wang Yang becomes a vice premier, as is widely predicted, his chances of being promoted to the PBSC seem greater than Li Yuanchao's. It also seems possible that either (or both) Sun Zhengcai (孙政才) and Hu Chunhua (胡春华) (both born in 1963), newly admitted into the Politburo, would be promoted to the PBSC, setting one of them on a course to be the next general secretary in 2022. In other words, it seems highly likely that five years from now there will be good reason to break with the promotion by age “rule.” If Jiang Zemin has died by that time, then it is possible that Hu Jintao would play a significant, if not uncontested, role as a party elder. It thus seems likely that the rules by which people are promoted are likely to get messier in the future, challenging recent party norms.

Central Committee

Of the 180 members of the Central Committee who are not on the Politburo or its Standing Committee, 39 are from the PLA, 5 of whom sit on the powerful Central Military Commission (including vice chairmen Xu Qiliang and Fan Changlong, who are also on the Politburo). Thus, there are 41 PLA representatives on the Central Committee and its Politburo, precisely the number that sat on the 17th Central Committee. There are 45 people who have positions in the State Council (at least at the time of the party congress) and 54 others who serve in the provinces (a number that is likely to change somewhat as people shift positions). Only 11 members of the Central Committee, other than Politburo members, seem to have jobs that exclusively run party affairs (including the leadership of the United Front Work Department, the International Liaison Department, and the CYL).

The only members of the Central Committee (excluding PB and CMC members) to be born before 1949 are Du Qinglin (杜青林) and Wang Shengjun (王胜俊). Du, born in 1946, was appointed to the Secretariat and hence is given an age exemption as a “party and state leader;” Wang Shengjun, also born in 1946, is president of the Supreme People’s Court and seems to be treated the same way. His predecessor, Xiao Yang (肖扬), served two terms and retired at the age of 70, and it appears that Wang will follow that precedent, despite rumors that he will be replaced in the spring.

Of the 205 full members of the 18th Central Committee, 52 were promoted from alternate membership in the 17th Central Committee (out of 167) while 53 people were promoted directly onto the new Central Committee. So being an alternate member of the Central Committee is not a sure indicator of future promotion.

The youngest member of the Central Committee is 45-year-old Lu Hao (陆昊), born in 1967. With a MA in economics from Peking University, Lu rose quickly, becoming head of the CYL in 2008. He is also the son of the former head of the Propaganda Department, Lu Dingyi (陆定一). The Central Committee member with the longest political longevity appears to be Xie Zhenhua (解振华), a vice minister of the National Reform and Development Commission. Born in 1949, Xie was an alternate member of the 10th Central Committee in 1973. He missed being on the 11th Central Committee, but rejoined in 1982 at the 12th Central Committee, and then missed two Central Committees before being selected to the 16th, 17th, and now 18th Central Committees. No one else has joined and fallen off the Central Committee in such a manner. Although being an alternate member of the Central Committee is no guarantee of promotion, some have been repeatedly elected alternate members before eventually being selected to full membership. Wu Aiyong (吴爱英), the Minister of Justice, served three terms as an alternate member before finally, this time, being selected as a full member of the Central Committee.

The Political Report

On November 8, as the party congress opened, Hu Jintao read most of a lengthy political report, which was subsequently published in full by Xinhua on November 17. As always,

the report started with a review of the past five years; tellingly, there seemed to be fewer successes and more problems to report this time around than five years ago. In 2007, Hu Jintao could talk about progress in building a “new socialist countryside” and abolishing the agricultural and other rural taxes.¹¹ He spoke of making the market system better and accelerating the transition of the role of government. This year, while not shying away from touting economic and other successes, Hu underscored problems in a way not apparent five years ago. This time, he talked about China’s development being “unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable,” of resource and environmental constraints becoming “more serious,” of social problems increasing “markedly,” and the threat of corruption being one that could cause the demise of the party and state (亡国亡党).¹² To underscore the seriousness with which the new leadership views the problem of corruption,

Hu’s report caused concern because of its strong endorsement of the state-owned economy. At a time when many people warn of the encroachments of the state on the private economy, Hu declared “We should unwaveringly consolidate and develop the public sector of the economy... and enhance the vitality of the state-owned sector of the economy and its capacity to leverage and influence the economy.” He did go on to say that “all forms of ownership [should] have equal access to factors of production,” a statement that might reflect the experiments undertaken with finance in Wenzhou, Guangzhou, and Quanzhou. Such a development would certainly be welcomed by China’s private sector, which has been systematically deprived of credit.

There were, however, some positive signs suggesting that the new administration understands the difficulties facing China and will take steps to try to address them. In addition to the use of strong language to point to the danger of corruption, Li Chuncheng (李春城), who had just been elected an alternate member of the Central Committee, was detained for investigation shortly after the close of the Congress.¹³

Moreover, the Eighteenth Party Congress report made a clear distinction between Mao Zedong Thought and Socialism with Chinese characteristics. The Seventeenth Party Congress report had muddled the distinction, talking about Mao Zedong Thought as part of the theoretical system of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, but the recent report makes clear reference to the Mao era as leaving “valuable lessons” and “theoretical *preparation*” for the Deng era.¹⁴ Relegating Mao Zedong Thought to the past may clear the way for new theoretical innovations going forward.

In this regard, it was heartening to see that “freedom, equality, fairness and rule by law (自由, 平等公正, 法制)—the “universal values” that have aroused such controversy in recent years—were included in the political report as part of the “core values” (核心价值观) of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This leaves room for considerable ideological movement in the coming years, if the party is willing to follow through.

Reflecting the consciousness that the new administration faces enormous challenges, the political report, for the first time, had a separate section on political reform. Although this suggestion falls short of what many people think is necessary, it does call for building a

healthy mechanism of self-governance, based on law, at the local level. It remains to be seen what specific measures the party will take to tackle the serious problems that exist at the local level.

Implications

Authoritarian regimes all face the problem of passing power from one generation to another, and many fail because they cannot solve this problem. China has approached this problem by adopting at least four mechanisms. First, it has adopted age-based retirement; officials at different levels must retire at a given age. Second, some significant proportion of the leadership must retire at each party congress, which means that each new leadership has to deal with people left over from the previous term. Third, to a greater or lesser extent, the interests of different parts of the party are balanced to prevent the over-concentration of power in the hands of one or more people. Fourth, age plays an important, but by no means exclusive, role in deciding who gets promoted. In addition, a process of “inner-party democracy,” by which the views of the members of the Central Committee are solicited, has begun to play an important, if still not well understood, role. There is obvious tension among these different mechanisms, which leaves room for sometimes sharp bargaining among different political actors.

Adopting these mechanisms, however informally, leads to an important trade-off, namely greater inflexibility. For instance, the bargaining associated with the 17th Party Congress five years ago resulted in the selection of Li Keqiang as China’s future premier (he will formally take up this position in March 2013 at the NPC meeting). Such a decision balances interests, but it has now forced China’s most experienced economic policy maker, Wang Qishan, to take up the position of the head of the CDIC. Wang may well prove capable in that position as China tackles the issue of corruption, but his talents as an economic policy maker will be wasted. Similarly, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were rivals for power. Perhaps they can put that past behind them and emerge as a “team of rivals,” but it is also possible that tensions will linger—Jiang Zemin was never able to cooperate closely with then-premier Li Peng (李鹏). Another question mark is the relationship between Li Keqiang and Zhang Gaoli (张高丽). Zhang’s past certainly exposed him to many different influences. He started out with Sinopec (中国石油) in Maoming, Guangdong, joined the planning apparatus of Guangdong, and then became secretary of Shenzhen. In more recent years, however, he has led Tianjin, which has centered its economic development on state-owned enterprises. Li Keqiang appears to back extensive reform of the economy, while Zhang’s views appear to be more conservative. In short, mechanisms chosen to facilitate the transfer of power may come at the cost of flexibility and clarity in decision-making. Rather than choosing a leader who then selects his cabinet, China prefers to balance interests, perhaps at the expense of policy. The last PBSC was racked with tensions that appear to have undermined its effectiveness; hopefully Xi will find a way to weld this diverse group into an effective team.

Whether as a result of bargaining or as a result of privileging age in promotions, the fact that five members of the new PBSC will have to retire in 2017 means that Xi will have to work with a different group, again with different views and interests, in only five years.

The tensions inherent in such a bargaining system are likely to test China's institutional limits in the coming years. Trying to represent different interests at the top of the system can make political management ineffective, just as tilting the system too far toward one side or another can breed resentment. Although the reaction to Bo Xilai's apparent challenge to the rules of the game may unite the current leaders in defense of the status quo, the temptation to appeal to populist solutions, especially if social tensions do not abate, will certainly continue to exist. Every five years China's party congresses declare that they are occurring at a crucial time in China's development; this time, the claim rings true.

Notes

¹ Joseph Fewsmith, "The Sixteenth National Party Congress: The Succession that Didn't Happen," *The China Quarterly*, No. 173 (March 2003): 3-16.

² Joseph Fewsmith, "The 17th Party Congress: Informal Politics and Formal Institutions," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 23 (Winter 2008).

³ Joseph Fewsmith, "Bo Xilai and Reform: What will be the Impact of His Removal?" *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 38 (Summer 2012).

⁴ Shi Jiangtao, "Former China President Jiang Zemin Played Key Role in Punishing Bo Xilai, Say Analysts," *South China Morning Post*, October 2, 2012.

⁵ On September 1, Xinhua announced Ling's new appointment and that Li Zhanshu would replace Ling as Director of the General Office.

⁶ "Hu's Aide and the Car Crash Cover-up," *South China Morning Post*, September 3, 2012; "Women in Playboy Ling Gu Ferrari Death Crash Named," *South China Morning Post*, November 26, 2012.

⁷ "China's Backroom Power Brokers Block Reform Candidates," *South China Morning Post*, November 21, 2012.

⁸ For the argument that age, not informal politics, dominated the decision-making, see Alice Miller's article in this issue of the *Monitor*.

⁹ 专家：全退为习规范 (Specialists: Complete retirement sets pattern for Xi), 明报, November 15, 2012. It is, of course, not impossible that Hu's retirement, even if the result of political defeat, will set a precedent that Xi and others find binding.

¹⁰ Neither of these "rules" have been announced in the PRC press, but both have been widely touted, apparently correctly, in the Hong Kong press.

¹¹ 胡锦涛在党的十七大上的报告 (Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Party Congress), http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content_6938568.htm.

¹² 胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国大会上的报告 (Hu Jintao's report to the 18th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party), Xinhua, November 17, 2012.

¹³ 中纪委：对李春城立案调查 (CDIC: File established in Li ChunCheng for investigation). See <http://inews.mingpao.com/htm/Inews/20130109/ca31922c.htm>.

¹⁴ 周瑞金 (Zhou Ruijin), "从历史视角看十八大—亮点，新特点 (Viewing the 18th Party Congress from an historical perspective—bright points and new characteristics), available at www.politicalchina.org/printnews.asp?newsid=227356.